SHOW GREAT LOVE
McCormick Theological Seminary

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Luke 7: 36-50

“. . . her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Luke 7:47

The project that is McCormick Theological Seminary, I think is enormously important. The project is to raise up, nurture, stimulate,, inspire, and insofar as possible train leaders for a church in a world no one alive has ever known or experienced before. It is a world profoundly different from the one in which I graduated and I suspect that

is true for you as well. I think about it every day. And I give thanks that there is a Presbyterian Seminary that understands that it is a new world: a Presbyterian Seminary that acknowledges that something huge and important is happening to all the old familiar structures, the denominations themselves, and to provide a theological education for a reality that is now gone, is to be irrelevant.

I love the fact that we are here, in this city, in this neighborhood, in this academic matrix, in this Lutheran Chapel in a brand new experiment in ecumenical theological education.

And I am grateful for Cynthia Campbell's visionary and gracious

leadership, for the faculty and staff and students and for each one of you who makes this important project possible.

He reminds me of one of the more fascinating characters in the Bible, a nameless woman who is also passionate and extravagant in her love.

Jesus was a dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee, a religious and community leader, by the name of Simon. The dinner was served on a low table, guests reclining on the ground, feet away from the table. As the guests arrived and the meal began a servant poured cool water over the feet of each guest and dried them with a towel — a gesture of common, everyday courtesy.

For some reason Simon neglected to extend this courtesy to Jesus. Some scholars think it was intentional. In any event, as the meal proceeds an uninvited guest enters. The meal was served in an open courtyard visible and accessible from the street. So she simply walks in, carrying an alabaster jar of ointment, sees Jesus, is overcome with emotion, starts to weep, kneels at his feet weeping, looses her hair, dries his feet, opens the jar and anoints his feet with the ointment. There's a lot going on here right in the middle of a proper dinner party. It is a very intimate thing she is doing. It is extravagant. Ointment was very expensive, not something anyone would use for an everyday occasion. Worst of all, however, the woman was a sinner.

What she had done to earn that description is not revealed. The loosened hair, the ointment, suggest to some that she was a prostitute. The point is she had no business being there — in the dining room of a proper, respectable and respected religious leader.

Simon sniffs his displeasure. If Jesus was a prophet as some are saying, he would know who this person is and ask her to leave. Jesus' response is to tell a story about a creditor who forgave a huge debt and a small debt. Who was more grateful? Simon falls into the trap: "the one to whom he cancelled the greater debt." He reminds Simon that the woman, the sinner, had extended the hospitality Simon had neglected,

and then, the point: “her sins which are many — are forgiven and she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Jesus’ purpose is to get into Simon’s heart. He had already accepted the woman and received her extravagant love. Obviously she knew about him. Obviously he had shown her an acceptance and grace that touched her deeply. Now he has his eye on Simon. He likes Simon, respects his integrity, his leadership, his devotion to his religion and its law. Simon likes Jesus, is intrigued with his authentic and strong teaching. They admire each other but they have very different notions of what God wants. Simon concludes that God wants order and

moral purity. God doesn't want a woman, any woman, particularly that woman at the dinner table. God wants people like her to be on the outside, at least until she confesses her sins, mends her ways and becomes presentable and acceptable. Sound familiar?

Simon's religion is exclusive. You have to be good to get in. Jesus' is inclusive. Simon expresses his religion by abiding by the rules, Jesus prefers the woman's passionate gratitude and extravagant love. Simon's religion pushes the woman, and people like her, away. Jesus accepts her, says, "You are welcome here."

Simon is offended by grace and so, sometimes, are we. Fred Craddock

warns about coming down too hard on Simon. In a thoughtful commentary on this incident he suggests that zeal for righteousness can make anybody self-righteous and prejudiced. Prejudice against the prejudiced is still prejudice, he says. After Jerry Falwell died recently, Will Willimon wrote a thoughtful and funny essay. Falwell regularly said things with which people like Willimon and me, and maybe you, profoundly disagreed, divisive and mean things about people and causes that are important to us. Falwell had a way of bringing out our own self-righteousness. When Willimon was Chaplain at Duke, a student dared him to invite Falwell to speak and he did. The faculty and student organization erupted in protest, reminding Willimon of all the outrageous

and mean things Falwell had said over the years.

When it came time for Will to introduce Falwell for the speech there were boos and hisses from the hostile audience. The speech was unremarkable: not particularly interesting, and not offensive. When it was time for questions, Willimon assumed things would get ugly, fast. The first question was confrontational. "You preach hate," the young woman said. "How many African Americans do you have at Liberty University?" The audience responded with cheers and applause.

Willimon remembers Falwell responding, "Young woman, you could

not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply." Hissing and jeering. "It is my most regrettable failure. I have worked, prayed, recruited all over the country and I regret to say that only 12% of our student body is African American. Now here at Duke," he continued, "your endowment is 50 times greater than ours, you have had years to work on the problem. Do you know how many African Americans are enrolled at Duke? I'll tell you. Six per cent! I pray that you will let the Lord help you do better." Dead silence in the packed auditorium (see The Christian Century, 6/12/07, Charms of an Ideologue).

Simon the Pharisee, a good man, was offended by Jesus' grace, extended to the sinful woman. And sometimes we

are offended by his grace extended to people like Simon.

It really is radical grace and we don't own it. It is not just for people for whom we have concern and sympathy. It really is for everyone.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says: "The true God is a God who cannot stop giving and forgiving, and our knowledge of this God is utterly bound up with our willingness to receive from the hand of God the liberty to give and forgive" (From the Introduction, *Free of Charge*).

God has arranged it so that being forgiven and forgiving go together: receiving and giving are part of the same experience, being loved and loving creates synergy, energy, passion, extravagance. And being a Christian means showing great love.

That's what Simon didn't get. And that's exactly what the woman did: expressed an extravagant, passionate, deeply grateful love because somehow she had discerned the good news, the Gospel truth, that she was accepted and loved, welcome and at home in the grace of Jesus Christ.

That's what the church is for, by the way: a place where sinners, all of them, respectable sinners, and not so

respectable sinners, are welcome: a place where those who are excluded elsewhere are included, a place brave and strong enough to extend hospitality, particularly to those, like that woman, who are denied hospitality, marginalized, kept outside.

In her latest book, *Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott tells about the Carpet Guy, her own experience of radical grace — eventually, but not without a long struggle. She teaches Sunday School in her small Presbyterian Church and one day bought a carpet remnant for her classroom for fifty dollars. She took the carpet home and unrolled it and

discovered a large patch of mold. The carpet simply would not do for her Sunday School children. She returned the carpet: the bookkeeper wasn't in then but she was promised that the money would be refunded later. When she returned the next day the owner said that someone had already picked up the money. "Impossible" she said. "Someone picked it up an hour ago" he said. Lamott telephoned other teachers. No one had picked up the money. There must be a mistake. She returned to make her case only to confront an equally adamant proprietor. "Someone picked up the money." "Look," she said, in her sternest Sunday School teacher voice, "I don't want to make trouble. But no one picked up the money. I'd like it. Now."

He tapped the ledger and the column of checks written — one for $50.

“That doesn’t mean anything. I’m from a Sunday School. This is for little children.” For good measure she added, “with asthma.”

Well, it escalated from there, to say the least, Lamott threatening, becoming very angry, bringing in friends to help, more confrontations, more obstinacy, now she’s using bad language. Finally the carpet guy writes a check for fifty dollars and in deep satisfaction and vindication and self-righteousness she takes it to the bank to cash it only to find there are insufficient funds.

She writes: “I sat outside the bank for a while. Look, I said to God, it’s to you, pal . . . Then I sat in the sun and started to laugh. I felt deep inside that I’d gotten it, though I could not quite have said what I’d gotten. I didn’t get the delicious taste of release I’d been expecting when a wrong has been righted, but I got something better, a kind of miracle.”

“Now what am I supposed to do?” she asked God and after a few minutes knew. One has a moral obligation to clean up one’s side of the street. So she took the carpet guy some flowers, with the bounced check and a note: “I am very sorry for the way I behaved. Anne.”

“You want to know how big God’s love is?” she asks. “The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you’re comfortable with.”

Putting Anne Lamott and the great philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich together is itself pretty funny, but Tillich said it, too.

“The history of humankind is the history of men and women who . . . wasted themselves out of the fullness of their hearts. People are sick, not only because they have not received love, but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourself or others, the abundant heart, the waste of self surrender.”

The good news is about God's passion, God's extravagant love, the symbol of which is a cross, and the life of a precious son: the very one who one day said: "her sins which were many are forgiven: hence she has shown great love."

So hear the good news.

You are forgiven and accepted.

You are the recipient of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Be grateful. Be extravagant.

Show your love for your dear ones — for your family, friends, your church, this Seminary.

Show your gratitude to God for this beautiful world, the miracle of your life,

for grace, acceptance, forgiveness,

God’s welcome — in Jesus Christ.

And — do show great love.